The Language of Baptism in Early Anglo-Saxon England: The Case for Old English

Miriam Adan Jones

Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam·

This essay explores the possibility that the vernacular (Old English) may have been used in the baptismal rite in Anglo-Saxon England before the middle of the eighth century. Statements made by Bede (d.735) and Boniface (d. 754), provisions in the Canons of the Council of Clofesho (747) and the probable existence of a lost Old English exemplar for the 'Old Saxon' or 'Utrecht' baptismal promise (Palatinus latinus 755, fols 6ᵛ–7ʳ), all suggest that it was. The use of the vernacular was most attractive in a context of ongoing Christianization, where the faith commitment of the baptizand was foregrounded and his or her understanding of the rite correspondingly highly valued. Later, the shift of focus towards the correct pronunciation of the Trinitarian formula and the increase of general knowledge about the baptismal rite reduced the impetus for translation, and Latin became the standard language of baptism. The translation and non-translation of the baptismal rite reflect broader concerns about the place of the Church of the English and its ethnic and cultural particularity within the universal Church, and particularly its relationship with Rome.

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· Faculty of Theology, Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam, De Boelelaan 1105, 1081 HV Amsterdam, The Netherlands. E-mail: m.a.adan@vu.nl.

In his *Ecclesiastical History of the English People*, completed in 731, Bede (d. 735) describes the conversion of the South Saxons as follows:

> Wilfrid taught them the faith and administered the baptism of salvation. … So the bishop, with the king's consent and indeed to his great joy, cleansed his ealdormen and his *gesiths* in the holy fount of baptism; the priests Eappa and Padda, Burghelm, and Eddi baptized the rest of the common people …[1]

Although this story underlines the importance of baptism as the moment of transition from paganism to Christianity, it tells us very little about the rite itself. In this regard it is typical: many narrative sources from early Anglo-Saxon England make reference to baptisms, few indicate how baptisms were conducted.[2] This essay highlights one particular aspect of the Anglo-Saxon baptismal rite which is here (and elsewhere) passed over in silence but which nevertheless carries significant theological weight: in what language was the rite performed?

Studies of the development of the medieval rite of baptism have tended to overlook this question, quietly assuming Latin as the universal liturgical language of the early medieval West.[3] Yet Anna Maria Luiselli Fadda has underlined the importance of a shared language of

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[1] '[Uilfrid] huic uerbum fidei et lauacrum salutis ministrabat … Itaque episcopus concedente, immo multum gaudente rege primos prouinciae duces ac milites sacrosancto fonte abluebat; uerum presbyteri Eappa et Padda et Burghelm et Oiddi ceteram plebem … baptizabant': Bede, *Historia ecclesiastica* [hereafter: *HE*] 4.13 (*Bede's Ecclesiastical History of the English People*, ed. and transl. Bertram Colgrave and R. A. B. Mynors, OMT [Oxford, 1969], 372, transl. 373).

[2] Sarah Foot, '"By Water in the Spirit": The Administration of Baptism in Early Anglo-Saxon England', in John Blair and Richard Sharpe, eds, *Pastoral Care before the Parish* (Leicester and New York, 1992), 171–92, at 172.

[3] Studies of medieval baptism include John Douglas Close Fisher, *Christian Initiation: Baptism in the Medieval West: A Study in the Disintegration of the Primitive Rite of Initiation*, Alcuin Club Collections 47 (London, 1965); Peter John Cramer, *Baptism and Change in the Early Middle Ages*,

communication to the conversion of the Anglo-Saxons, and argued convincingly that the vernacular played a vital role in the dissemination of Christianity in Anglo-Saxon England.[4] Others have recently shown that, even among educated religious, Latin need not have always been the language of communication.[5] Helen Foxhall Forbes writes that '[t]he majority of the [Anglo-Saxon baptismal] liturgy itself took place in Latin', but leaves open the question of what parts, if any, may have taken place in another language.[6] And although Joseph Lynch suggests that parts of the baptismal rite may have been spoken in the vernacular, he does not further explore that suggestion or its implications.[7]

This paper argues that the vernacular was used in the rite of baptism in the early Anglo-Saxon Church. In addition to presenting the admittedly scarce and often indirect evidence that (parts of) the baptismal liturgy were translated from Latin into Old English, it

c.*200*–c.*1150* (Cambridge and New York, 1993); Susan A. Keefe, *Water and the Word: Baptism and the Education of the Clergy in the Carolingian Empire*, 2 vols, Publications in Medieval Studies (Notre Dame, IN, 2002); Bryan D. Spinks, *Early and Medieval Rituals and Theologies of Baptism: From the New Testament to the Council of Trent* (Aldershot and Burlington, VT, 2006). For Anglo-Saxon England, see Joseph H. Lynch, *Christianizing Kinship: Ritual Sponsorship in Anglo-Saxon England* (Ithaca, NY, and London, 1998); M. Bradford Bedingfield, *The Dramatic Liturgy of Anglo-Saxon England* (Woodbridge 2002), 171–90; Foot, '"By Water in the Spirit"'.

[4] Anna Maria Luiselli Fadda, 'The Vernacular and the Propagation of the Faith in Anglo-Saxon Missionary Activity', in Pieter N. Holtrop and Hugh McLeod, eds, *Missions and Missionaries*, SCH S 13 (Woodbridge, 2000), 1–15.

[5] Alaric Hall, 'Interlinguistic Communication in Bede's *Historia Ecclesiastica Gentis Anglorum*', in *Interfaces between Language and Culture in Medieval England: A Festschrift for Matti Kilpiö*, ed. Alaric Hall et al. (Leiden 2012), 37–80; Anton Scharer, 'The Role of Language in Bede's Ecclesiastical History', in idem, *Changing Perspectives on England and the Continent in the Early Middle Ages* (Farnham and Burlington, VT, 2014), art. II, at 1–8.

[6] Helen Foxhall Forbes, *Heaven and Earth in Anglo-Saxon England: Theology and Society in an Age of Faith*, Studies in Early Medieval Britain (Farnham, 2013), 103–11, quotation at 104.

[7] Lynch, *Christianizing Kinship*, 176–7.

examines the cultural, theological and institutional contexts in which translation made sense. It further suggests that in seeking the balance between acculturation and catholicity, vernacular baptism demonstrates how the Anglo-Saxon Church navigated the tension between asserting the local and universal aspects of its identity.

That the vernacular may have been used at baptism is suggested by the practical difficulties of using Latin, the language in which the baptismal rite would have been received from the Roman missionaries who brought Christianity to the Anglo-Saxon kingdoms, when many Anglo-Saxons would have been unable to speak or understand it.[8] Although some scholars have suggested that the descendants of the Romano-British may have continued to use Latin well into the Anglo-Saxon period, there must also have been native speakers of Old English who never learned another language, or never learned it well.[9] Bede certainly treats fluency in Latin as something exceptional when he notes that it was only under the tutelage of Theodore and Hadrian that some Anglo-Saxon clergy had come to 'know Latin … just as well as their native tongue'.[10]

Explaining the duties of pastors towards their flocks in a letter of 734, Bede writes that preachers and priests should 'zealously preach in each hamlet the word of God and offer the heavenly mysteries and above all perform the sacrament of baptism'. The laity should learn the faith as expressed in the Lord's Prayer, the Creed and the gospel. '[A]s for the unlearned, that is, who know their own language only, make these learn the texts in their own

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[8] This does not, however, mean that there were no multilingual Anglo-Saxons, or that all Old English texts were meant for a monolingual audience: Helen Gittos, 'The Audience for Old English Texts: Ælfric, Rhetoric and "the Edification of the Simple"', *Anglo-Saxon England* 43 (2014), 231–66.

[9] Anthony Harvey, 'Cambro-Romance? Celtic Britain's Counterpart to Hiberno-Latin', in *Early Medieval Ireland and Europe: Chronology, Contacts, Scholarship. Festschrift for Dáibhí Ó Cróinin*, ed. Pádraic Moran and Immo Warntjes, Studia Traditionis Theologiae 14 (Turnhout, 2015), 179–202; Hall, 'Interlinguistic Communication'.

[10] 'Latinam … linguam aeque ut propriam in qua nati sunt norunt': *HE* 4.2 (Bede, *Ecclesiastical History*, ed. and transl. Colgrave and Mynors, 334, transl. 335).

tongue … I have frequently offered translations of both the Creed and the Lord's Prayer into English to many unlearned priests.'[11] Although Bede's comments here say nothing about the language of baptism, they do make some things clear: first, baptism was considered a key element of pastoral ministry; second, most lay people and many priests did not speak or understand Latin; third, Bede approved of, even actively encouraged, the translation of religious or liturgical texts into Old English for the benefit of those who could not otherwise understand. All this suggests that Bede may have been open to using the vernacular in the baptismal rite. The canons of the council of *Clofesho* (747) make the connection between vernacular instruction and baptism more explicit. Among the requirements for priests is that they must learn to translate and explain the words used in the mass and at baptism.[12] The canon that immediately follows indicates that those who bring children to be baptized are to be taught those parts of the baptismal liturgy in which they play an active role: the renunciation of the devil and the confession of faith.[13] Here we have a clear indication that

[11] 'in singulis uiculis praedicando Dei uerbo et consecrandis mysteriis caelestibus, ac maxime peragendis sacri baptismatis officiis, ubi opportunitas ingruerit … sed idiotas, hoc est eos qui propriae tantum linguae notitiam habent, haec ipsa sua lingua discere … et ipse multiae saepe sacerdotibus idiotis haec utraque, et symbolum uidelicet et dominicam orationem, in linguam Anglorum translatam optuli': Bede, *Letter to Ecgbert*, in C. Grocock and I. N. Wood, *The Abbots of Wearmouth and Jarrow*, OMT (Oxford, 2013), 130–2 (D. H. Farmer, *Bede: Ecclesiastical History of the English People* [London and New York, 1990], 339–40).

[12] Arthur West Haddan and William Stubbs, eds, *Councils and Ecclesiastical Documents relating to Great Britain and Ireland*, 3: *English Churches during the Anglo-Saxon period : A.D. 595–1066* (Oxford, 1871), 366.

[13] Ibid.

translation and explanation, obviously also in the vernacular, are taking place in the broader baptismal context.[14]

In addition to guidelines aimed at the priests providing pastoral care, we have evidence of the laity's desire to receive pastoral care in their own language. According to Bede, linguistic ability was an important consideration in King Egbert of Kent's selection of Wigheard (d. 664x667) for the episcopal see of Canterbury:

> Egbert was eager to have him consecrated … reckoning that, if he had a bishop of his own race and language, he and his people would be able to enter all the more deeply into the teachings and mysteries of their faith, since they would receive them at the hands of someone of their own kin and [tribe] and hear them not through an interpreter but in their own native tongue.[15]

Wigheard's ability to communicate the *verbi fidei* and *mysteria* in his native English was a valuable skill that set him apart from earlier bishops of Canterbury, who had until recently all been Roman (although his immediate predecessor was a West Saxon). In this context, surely the 'words' and 'mysteries' which the Kentish hoped to receive in their native language

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[14] Lynch, *Christianizing Kinship*, 175–6; but see Catherine Cubitt, 'Pastoral Care and Conciliar Canons: The Provisions of the 747 Council of Clofesho', in Blair and Sharpe, eds, *Pastoral Care before the Parish*, 193–211, at 196, for an alternative explanation.

[15] 'cupiens eum … ordinari episcopum, quatinus suae gentis et linguae habens antistitem, tanto prefectius cum subiectis sibi populis uel uerbis imburetur fide uel mysteriis, quanto haec non per interpretem, sed per cognati et contribulis uiri linguam simul manumque susciperet': Bede, in Grocock and Wood, *Abbots of Wearmouth and Jarrow*, 26–8 (D. H. Farmer, *The Age of Bede* [London, 1998], 189).

represent the dual pastoral tasks of preaching and administering the sacraments, including baptism.[16]

What might a vernacular baptismal rite have been like? Unfortunately, we have no liturgical texts for the baptismal rite in the Anglo-Saxon kingdoms before the tenth century.[17] However, we do have a text which arguably derives from an English exemplar, but one which due to its continental provenance has not been given due consideration as evidence for English practice: the so-called Old Saxon or Utrecht baptismal promise.[18] The language of the words to be spoken is Old Saxon; directions are given in Latin. The candidate is asked *forsàchistu diabolae?* ('do you renounce the devil?') and prompted to respond (*et respondeat*): *ec forsacho diabolae* ('I renounce the devil'). In the same way the candidate renounces all *diobolgeldae* ('pagan sacrifices') and 'all the devil's works and words; Thunar and Woden and Saxnot and all the demons that are their companions' before making confession of faith in God the Father, Son and Holy Spirit.[19]

Although the language of this promise is Old Saxon, the text has long been recognized to show Old English influences, leading scholars to posit an Old English, possibly

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[16] D. R. Howlett, ed., *Dictionary of Medieval Latin from British Sources* (Oxford, 2001), *s.vv.* 'Mysterium, Misterium'.

[17] Foot, '"By Water in the Spirit"', 172; Spinks, *Early and Medieval Rituals*, 127.

[18] Vatican City, Bibliotheca Apostolica Vaticana, Palatinus Latinus, MS 577, fols 6^v–7^r.

[19] '6v^o: Forsachistu diobolae. & respondeat. ec forsacho diabolae. end allum diobolgeldę respondeat. end ec forsacho allum diobolgeldae. end allum dioboles uuercum. respondeat. end ec forsacho allum dioboles uuercum and uuordum thunaer ende uuoden ende saxnote ende allvm them unholdum the hira genotas sint. 7r^o: gelobistu in got alamehtigan fadaer. ec gelobo in got alamehtigan fadaer. gelobistu in crist godes suno. ec gelobo in crist gotes suno. gelobistu in halogan gast. ec gelobo in halogan gast': Maurits Gysseling, *Corpus van Middelnederlandse teksten (tot en met het jaar 1300)*, II.1: *Fragmenten* (The Hague, 1980), 26. I have substituted punctuation where Gysseling has line-breaks.

Northumbrian, exemplar for the extant text.[20] There are also strong historical arguments for

associating the document and the collection in which it is found with the Anglo-Saxon

missions to the continent, either that of the Northumbrian Willibrord (d. 739) and his circle to

Frisia and later Saxony, with its base in Utrecht, or that of the West Saxon Wynfrith, later

Boniface (d. 754), to Hesse and Thuringia.[21] This text therefore shows us that the vernacular

was being used by Anglo-Saxon priests in the baptismal liturgy – certainly abroad, and, if the

Old Saxon version was indeed derived from an Old English one, probably also at home, from

whence the now-lost exemplar came. Even without the linguistic evidence, it seems plausible

that the idea of a translated baptismal rite could have originated in England, to which the

missionaries often looked for their liturgical inspiration.[22] If nothing else, the baptismal

promise shows that early eighth-century Anglo-Saxon clergy did not object to using the

vernacular in the baptismal rite, but considered it perfectly acceptable and indeed preferable

when called for by the circumstances. These circumstances may have been quite similar in

some parts of England to the areas on the continent where Anglo-Saxon missionaries worked:

among a largely unlatinate population, recently and perhaps incompletely Christianized, being

served by a relatively small number of clergy, who may themselves not have been particularly

familiar or comfortable with the Latin tongue.

It can hardly be a coincidence that of all the elements of the baptismal liturgy, it is the

renunciation of the devil and profession of faith that exist in a vernacular translation. This

reflects an ancient tradition in which the interrogation formed the heart of the baptismal

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[20] Agathe Lasch, 'Das altsächsische Taufgelöbnis', *Neuphilologische Mitteilungen* 36 (1935), 92–133;

William Foerste, *Untersuchungen zur westfälischen Sprache des 9. Jahrhunderts.*, Münstersche

Forschungen 2 (Marburg, 1950), 92–8, esp. 93; D. L. Machielsen, 'De angelsaksische herkomst van de

zogenaamde Oudsaksische Doopbelofte. Een bijdrage tot de externe taalgeschiedenis', *Leuvense

Bijdragen* 50 (1961), 97–124; Gysseling, *Corpus*, 22–6.

[21] Marco Mostert, 'Communicating the Faith: The Circle of Boniface, Germanic Vernaculars, and

Frisian and Saxon Converts', *Amsterdamer Beiträge zur älteren Germanistik* 70 (2013), 87–130.

[22] Yitzhak Hen, 'The Liturgy of St Willibrord', *Anglo-Saxon England* 26 (1997), 41–62.

liturgy, and the threefold immersion of the candidate was interspersed with the threefold confession of belief in Father, Son and Holy Spirit.[23] In this tradition, intelligibility was not just a practical but also a theological concern: baptism could only be administered if the baptizand understood and believed.[24] Old English is used sparingly in liturgical texts from Anglo-Saxon England, but it does occur 'in circumstances in which it is critical that [the person addressed] understands what is happening'.[25] Examples of such circumstances in late Anglo-Saxon England included trials, excommunications and coronations.[26] The evidence of the baptismal promise, and other indirect references such as those discussed above, suggests that in the early Anglo-Saxon Church the baptismal interrogation was among those instances when it was thought critical that the words exchanged should be fully understood. That understanding was ensured by translating the renunciation of the devil and profession of faith into the vernacular.[27]

Translation aided understanding not only by allowing the participants to understand the specific words spoken and thus the content of the promises made, but also to comprehend the structure and nature of the rite as a whole. Andreas Wagner, taking the Germanic oath of fealty as an analogue, has argued that in early medieval Germany, baptism would have been understood as a *Herrschaftswechsel* ('change of lordship') and the baptismal promise as a

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[23] Fisher, *Christian Initiation*, 16–17.

[24] Cramer, *Baptism and Change*, 186; Owen M. Phelan, 'Forging Traditional Liturgy: Exegesis, Mission, and Medieval Baptism', *RHE* 107 (2012), 833–9.

[25] Helen Gittos, 'Is there any Evidence for the Liturgy of Parish Churches in Late Anglo-Saxon England? The Red Book of Darley and the Status of Old English', in Francesca Tinti, ed., *Pastoral Care in Late Anglo-Saxon England*, Anglo-Saxon Studies 6 (Woodbridge, 2005), 63–82, at 80.

[26] Ibid. 78–80.

[27] Compare canon 27 of the Statuta Bonifatii: 'Nullus sit presbiter, qui in ipsa lingua, qua nati sunt, baptizandos abrenuntiationes vel confessiones aperte interrogare non studeat, ut intellegant, quae abrenuntiant vel quae confitentur; et qui taliter agere dedignantur, secedat in parrochia': MGH Capitula Episcoporum 3, 364.

declarative speech-act that transformed the baptismal candidate through the transfer of allegiance from the devil to Christ.[28] There is evidence that the Anglo-Saxons, too, thought of baptism as a change in allegiance. For instance, Bede remarked that the baptized were 'changed from sons of the devil into sons of God'.[29] The words spoken at baptism may well have been viewed as operating in the same way as legal oaths, for in Anglo-Saxon England the boundaries between liturgy and legal procedures were often not clearly defined.[30] Certainly in the early Anglo-Saxon church it seems likely that the new rite of baptism would have been understood by analogy to existing local customs, like the oath of fealty sworn by a man to his lord.[31] The similarities between these procedures would have been underscored by the use of the same language for both.

Baptism was, however, not only a sign of the faith commitment made by the candidate, but also of the grace poured out by God. The first aspect had been emphasized in the early Church and continued to be emphasized in missionary contexts in the early Middle Ages, while the second aspect became more prominent where Christianity was the established religion.[32] With the shift in focus from the action of the candidate to the action of God came a new preoccupation with form, and quickly the validity of the baptism came to hinge on the correct use of the Trinitarian formula: 'I baptize you in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit'.[33] Boniface was so perturbed to encounter individuals who had been,

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[28] Andreas Wagner, 'Taufe als Willensakt? Zum Verständnis der frühmittelalterlichen Taufgelöbnisse und zur Begründung ihrer volkssprachigen Übersetzung', *Zeitschrift für deutsches Altertum und deutsche Literatur* 125 (1996), 297–321.

[29] Cited in Spinks, *Early and Medieval Rituals*, 129.

[30] Janet L. Nelson, 'Liturgy or Law: Misconceived Alternatives', in *Early Medieval Studies in Memory of Patrick Wormald*, ed. Stephen David Baxter et al., Studies in Early Medieval Britain (Farnham, 2009), 433–47.

[31] Ibid. 444–6; Gittos, 'Liturgy of Parish Churches', 80 n. 101.

[32] Cramer, *Baptism and Change*, 130–40.

[33] Foot, '"By Water in the Spirit"', 178.

on account of the priest's deficient Latin, baptized 'in the name of the fatherland and the daughter and the Holy Spirit' that he ordered their rebaptism.[34] But a generation earlier Bede had adopted a more flexible attitude: he argued that, while baptism in the name of the Trinity was the norm, the sacrament could be administered by naming only one Person of the Trinity, for to express faith in one was to express faith in all.[35] The shift in emphasis from the confession of the baptizand (or his or her representatives) to the correct use of the Trinitarian formula thus seems still to have been in process during this period.

The new emphasis on form undermined the motivation for translation of the baptismal rite into the vernacular: no longer was the rite to be understood as analogous to a legal oath, nor were the understanding and faith of the baptizand a primary concern. Indeed, the new stress on correct formula potentially restricted the possibility of translation. Would baptisms conducted in another language be valid? Boniface apparently voiced just such a concern to Pope Gregory III (731–41), inquiring what to do about 'those who were baptized according to the varieties and the inflections of the heathen dialects'.[36] Boniface's original letter is lost, and the exact nature of his concern is not clear from Gregory's response. The latter makes clear, however, that any concerns Boniface may have had about the theological status of 'heathen' vernaculars were unfounded: those who were baptized in the name of the Trinity, regardless of the language, were to be confirmed in the usual manner.[37]

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[34] MGH Epp. Sel. 1, 141 (letter 68). For this he was reprimanded by Pope Zacharias (741–52): it was the priest's Trinitarian intentions that counted, and the baptisms were to be considered valid. On later medieval philosophical debates regarding intentional versus conventional meaning, see I. Rosier-Catach, 'Speech Act and Intentional Meaning in the Medieval Philosophy of Language', *Bulletin de philosophie médiévale* 52 (2010), 55–80.

[35] Bede, *Expositio actuum apostolorum* 10 (CChr.SL 121, 3–99).

[36] 'Illi … qui baptizati sunt per diversitate et declinatione linguarum gentilitatis': MGH Epp. Sel. 1, 73 (letter 45); ET *The Letters of Saint Boniface*, intro. Thomas F. X. Noble, transl. Ephraim Emerton (New York, 2000), 73.

[37] MGH Epp. Sel. 1, 73 (letter 45).

Pope Gregory's comments underline the point that Latin was not considered a sacred language. In Anglo-Saxon England, the influence of Archbishop Theodore of Canterbury (d. 690), originally from the Greek East, would have challenged the theological importance of Latin by exposing his students to another, and older, language of Christian worship and thought.[38] Anglo-Saxon theologians greatly respected the three languages used in the study of Scripture, Hebrew, Greek and Latin, but did not object to translation of biblical texts.[39] Bede's commentary on Acts made clear that he believed there was room within the Church for all languages: this was the message of the events of Pentecost.[40] Indeed, 'there was a sacrality in the use of the individual language of each people', and this emphatically included Old English.[41]

Nevertheless, Latin had become the language of the study of the Scriptures in the medieval West, and so bound together the speakers of different languages.[42] In baptism, the candidate was understood to be entering into the Church universal, and to clergy desiring to emphasize the Church's catholicity it may have seemed appropriate to baptize in the language shared by all the Christian West. Latin was also the language of the Roman Church, and to Anglo-Saxon ecclesiastics, Rome stood for apostolicity and orthodoxy, making unity with

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[38] On Theodore, see Michael Lapidge, ed., *Archbishop Theodore: Commemorative Studies on his Life and Influence*, Cambridge Studies in Anglo-Saxon England 11 (Cambridge, 1995). On the knowledge of Greek in Anglo-Saxon England, see Mary Catherine Bodden, 'Evidence for Knowledge of Greek in Anglo-Saxon England', *Anglo-Saxon England* 17 (1988), 217–46.

[39] Tristan Major, 'Rebuilding the Tower of Babel: Ælfric and Bible Translation', *Florilegium* 23/2 (2006), 47–60, at 50–1.

[40] Kees Dekker, 'Pentecost and Linguistic Self-Consciousness in Anglo-Saxon England: Bede and Ælfric', *Journal of English and Germanic Philology* 104 (2005), 345–72. On the status of Old English for Bede, see also Gittos, 'Audience for Old English Texts', 260.

[41] Robert Stanton, *The Culture of Translation in Anglo-Saxon England* (Cambridge and Rochester, NY, 2002), 70.

[42] *HE* 1.1 (Bede, *Ecclesiastical History*, ed. and transl. Colgrave and Mynors, 16).

Rome paramount.[43] The desire for *Romanitas* is reflected throughout the canons of *Clofesho*, which insist again and again that things be done 'after the model of the Roman church'.[44] Using Latin, even though unnecessary from a theological perspective, could be attractive if it was thought to lend the ritual, the priest and the Church as institution the legitimacy and credibility that came from being associated with the Roman Church.

Coupled with the Anglo-Saxon Church's association with Rome was a dissociation from the churches of the Britons. If Rome signified catholicity and orthodoxy, the Britons stood under permanent suspicion of heretical and schismatic tendencies.[45] They also used a different baptismal rite from the Romans, one which from the Roman – and Anglo-Saxon – perspective was deficient.[46] The difference between the two rites became enshrined in the Old English word for baptism, *fullwiht*, which derives from a root meaning 'complete hallowing' and contrasts the rite received by the Anglo-Saxon Church from Rome with the 'incomplete' version performed by the British.[47] The term captures something of what must have been a widespread controversy about baptismal validity in conversion-age England. Adhering strictly to the Roman baptismal rite may thus have been one way for the English Church to distinguish itself from the British Church and distance itself from its perceived insularity. In addition to being an institutional identity-marker, baptismal completeness was a pastoral concern. The possibility that the baptism offered was lacking in some respect may have occupied not only theologians but also laypeople concerned about the fates of their friends

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[43] Nicholas Howe, 'Rome: Capital of Anglo-Saxon England', *Journal of Medieval and Early Modern Studies* 34 (2004), 147–72; Nicholas Brooks, 'Canterbury, Rome and the Construction of English Identity', in *Early Medieval Rome and the Christian West: Essays in Honour of Donald A. Bullough*, ed. Julia M. H. Smith, Medieval Mediterranean 28 (Leiden and Boston, 2000), 221–46.

[44] Richard William Pfaff, *The Liturgy in Medieval England: A History* (Cambridge, 2009), 45.

[45] E.g. *HE* 5.23 (Bede, *Ecclesiastical History*, ed. and transl. Colgrave and Mynors, 523).

[46] Ibid. 2.2 (Bede, *Ecclesiastical History*, ed. and transl. Colgrave and Mynors, 138).

[47] Carla Falluomini, 'Fullwiht and the Baptismal Rite in Anglo-Saxon England', *Anglia – Zeitschrift für englische Philologie* 128 (2011), 391–405.

and relatives.[48] Emphasizing the fullness of the Roman rite could have helped to assuage such concerns, at the same time leveraging them to bolster the position of Rome and discredit the British tradition.[49]

Although the Anglo-Saxons liked to think of themselves as allies and perhaps even heirs of Rome, they were also aware of their distinctive identity as the 'church of the English'.[50] One of the things that bound these 'English' together was a shared mother tongue, and this could be used for spiritual as well as secular matters. I have noted already that Bede translated the Lord's Prayer and the creed into Old English; Bede's pupil Cuthbert tells us that Bede was engaged at the end of his life with translating the Gospel of John, and that he composed or recited a vernacular verse about his approaching death.[51] Later generations would compose Old English heroic verse on themes inspired by scriptural and apocryphal texts. Cramer reads one such poem, which narrates the adventures of the apostle Andrew, as 'baptism put into a vernacular story, and so made accessible in both language and form'.[52] Such literary efforts testify to the ongoing project of the Anglo-Saxon Church to integrate the

[48] Such concerns are well documented in relation to the unbaptized. Consider, for instance, the woman who, fearing for her unbaptized child, sought the help of St Wilfrid: Eddius Stephanus, *The Life of Bishop Wilfrid*, ed. and transl. Bertram Colgrave (Cambridge and New York, 1985), ch. 18; Foot, '"By Water in the Spirit"', 190.

[49] Perhaps the use of Old English was one way in which the Anglo-Saxon baptismal rite could be distinguished from the British, especially if the Britons were seen by the Anglo-Saxons 'to be characterized not by their Celtic speech, but by their living use of Latin', as Harvey has suggested: Harvey, 'Cambro-Romance', 201.

[50] Patrick Wormald, 'The Venerable Bede and the 'Church of the English', in Stephen David Baxter, ed., *The Times of Bede: Studies in Early English Christian Society and Its Historian* (Malden, MA, 2006), 207–28; Sarah Foot, *Bede's Church*, Jarrow Lecture (Jarrow, 2012), 1–18.

[51] Cuthbert, *Cuthbert's Letter on the Death of Bede*, in Bede, *Ecclesiastical History*, ed. and transl. Colgrave and Mynors, 579–87, at 580–2.

[52] Cramer, *Baptism and Change*, 202.

texts, teachings and practices inherited from the early Church into their own context. It also shows that direct translation of the liturgy was not the only way that the rite of baptism might be reinterpreted for an Anglo-Saxon audience.

In later Anglo-Saxon England, clergy came to rely on general Christian (vernacular) education to ensure understanding of the baptismal rite, rather than translation of the liturgy.[53] In earlier times, however, the situation was different. In the context of a semi-Christianized Anglo-Saxon landscape, the necessity of helping both priest and people understand what was transpiring in the waters of baptism – both practically and theologically desirable – encouraged the translation of the baptismal rite into Old English. Using the vernacular in the liturgy of baptism would have emphasized the conversion aspect of baptism; evoking associations with vernacular traditions of oath-taking, it would have placed the baptismal candidate's faith and commitment in the foreground, while the aspects of baptism that are done to and for the baptizand were correspondingly de-emphasized. Accordingly, this approach would have been most attractive in a context where adults were converting to Christianity and being baptized by choice: throughout the seventh century and perhaps the early eighth in some places.[54] The urge to translate would have ebbed as more and more people came to have a general knowledge of what baptism entailed, infant baptism became the norm and the emphasis in baptismal theology came to lie increasingly on form rather than faith.

The questions surrounding the language of baptism thus mirror broader concerns within the newly formed Church of the English, searching for balance between making the faith accessible and ensuring its correctness and completeness. The Anglo-Saxon translation (and later non-translation) of the baptismal rite sheds light on how the Anglo-Saxon Church sought to carve out an identity for itself between the local and the universal. It also illustrates changes in early medieval baptismal theology and how these were bound up with changing

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[53] Forbes, *Heaven and Earth*, 104–8; Spinks, *Early and Medieval Rituals*, 132–3.

[54] John Blair, *The Church in Anglo-Saxon Society* (Oxford, 2005), 168.

cultural contexts. Even though Latin won out in the end, what evidence we have for the baptismal rite in early Anglo-Saxon England shows that we should not assume that it was always self-evident to the Anglo-Saxons that the business of Christian initiation should be conducted in Latin: the vernacular could, given the right circumstances, be a viable and attractive option.